



## Ravalli County Aviation Safety Foundation, Inc.

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Attached are materials that may be helpful as the County Commissioners deliberate on the future of the Ravalli County Airport. The facts and financial information were gathered and formatted by a committee made up of members of the Ravalli County Aviation Safety Foundation, the Ravalli County Pilots Association, the Airport Advisory Board, and the Airport Manager. Assisting were representatives of the Montana Department of Transportation Aeronautics Division, the FAA, Wilbur Smith Associates, Robert Peccia and Associates, and the Ravalli County Accounting Office staff. Bitter Root Cultural Heritage Trust assisted with the Community Use information.

The accuracy of the information presented in "Ravalli County Airport 2009: Health and Safety," "Ravalli County Airport 2009: Community Use," and "Ravalli County Airport 2009: Smart Economics" has been verified. These fact sheets are summaries of pertinent points relating to the issue of proceeding with safety improvements at our community airport. By circulating these fact sheets, you will be satisfying the community's need for information rather than opinion.

We hope you will find this information helpful. Please feel free to contact us for further clarification.

Ravalli County Aviation Safety Foundation



## **RAVALLI COUNTY AIRPORT 2009: HEALTH AND SAFETY**

Ravalli County is facing some difficult decisions that will impact a valuable community resource – the Ravalli County Airport. The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) has determined that current verified use of the airport at Hamilton requires compliance with a new set of safety regulations. Several options for meeting the FAA's requirements are being examined in an Environmental Assessment that is still in process. The options are reviewed with several criteria in mind: level of safety achieved; environmental consequences including impacts on fisheries, wetlands, air quality, noise pollution, and historic resources; economic considerations; the community's aviation future needs including wildfire management, air ambulance, search and rescue, tourism and business use.

Morrison-Maierle, the engineering firm responsible for completion of the Environmental Assessment, has been working with the FAA, Montana State Fish Wildlife and Parks, Army Corps of Engineers, Montana State Historical Preservation Office, Montana Preservation Alliance, and other experts to address all possible concerns about the results of recommended safety improvements. After compiling extensive relevant data, the conclusion reached is that the alternative best satisfying most criteria is to shift the main runway 400 feet to the east and 600 feet north, and lengthen it to 5,200 feet. This alternative provides several attractive safety features.

### **IMPROVED SEPARATION FOR SAFETY AND NOISE REDUCTION**

Aircraft currently landing or departing from Ravalli County Airport pass at a low altitude over a densely populated residential area located just off the south end of the runway. Shifting the runway east and north would allow aircraft to pass those homes at a substantially higher altitude, thus reducing current noise levels in that area, reducing any possible exposure to air pollutants produced by aircraft, and reducing risk if an aircraft-related emergency arises. The landing pattern would also be shifted to the east, and aircraft would no longer need to fly in close proximity to Hamilton High School. Ramp parking space would be increased, eliminating the need for extra landings and takeoffs many jets currently make so they can park at the Missoula County Airport.

### **FASTER RESPONSE FOR WILDLAND FIRE SUPPRESSION**

Each year our wildland fire seasons seem to expand in length and severity. The Forest Service utilizes the Ravalli County Airport for its Bitterroot National Forest fire management activities. A safe fixed-wing base in a central location allows the FS to most efficiently handle fire emergencies. Fire patrol, Air Attack platform, single-engine air tanker, lead plane, and rotary aircraft can be co-located at the airport. Maintenance, fire crew re-supply, and overhead management team duties can be rapidly coordinated. A longer runway would increase safety for all the fixed-wing operations, including allowing aircraft to carry larger loads, (i.e., water/retardant, fuel, passengers), especially on hot days.

### **CONTINUED SAFE AND TIMELY MEDICAL EMERGENCY TRANSPORTATION**

Other current uses would be safer with a longer runway and greater separation between taxiways, ramp space and the runway. Many of the air ambulance, business use, and recreational aircraft that currently use the Ravalli County Airport are operated with little or no safety margin in case of emergencies on takeoff or landing. Each pilot in command of an aircraft is responsible for making the decision to land or take off at a particular airport, and even though performance manuals are used to support the pilot's choice, the data available to make the determination can vary greatly from what is expected.

Our community deserves the safest airport possible to serve its varied needs for decades to come.



## **RAVALLI COUNTY AIRPORT 2009: COMMUNITY BENEFITS**

The Environmental Assessment being prepared to examine the impacts of necessary safety improvements at Ravalli County Airport includes several alternatives that could result in additional unexpected benefits to the general public. These community benefits, available at minimal local cost, are a huge bonus if our county leaders choose to proceed with the proposed alternative that best meets safety improvements and planning for future use required by the FAA. Not only would we gain a safer airport, but also secure opportunities to cherish our culture, educate area youth, enjoy breathtaking views of the Sapphire Mountains, and provide new public recreation access to one of the most beautiful areas in the Bitterroot Valley.

### **ENHANCING OPPORTUNITIES FOR CELEBRATING OUR CULTURAL HERITAGE**

The airport (county) already owns the Leonardi Farmstead, a fine example of an 1880's – 1930's typical family farmstead that for a few years was a Daly Bitterroot Stockfarm dairy farm. The Bitter Root Cultural Heritage Trust has plans to develop the site over the next few years to include nonprofit organization office space, a functioning orchard, agricultural demonstration areas, a showcase-quality pasture and hay harvesting operation, and a walk-through agricultural equipment museum. Our community's children will be able to learn about the valley's past by watching local farmers and ranchers demonstrate how to milk cows, shear sheep, harvest apples and garden vegetables, herd livestock, and use various types of farming and ranching equipment.

### **FILLING A NEED FOR MEETING SPACE AND YOUTH ACTIVITIES**

If a land purchase is made in conjunction with plans to meet FAA safety standards at the Hamilton Airport, two 1930's – 1940's era hangars located just southeast of the existing runway will be moved west at FAA expense to new foundations, where they will be structurally stabilized and re-roofed. A committee established by the Ravalli County Aviation Safety Foundation has already begun working on plans to convert one of the hangars to an aviation museum to tell the stories of early agriculturally-related flying, World War II training, medical transport, and wilderness aviation in the Bitterroot. The other hangar would be transformed into a community center. These two buildings would fill community needs for a place for youth projects (i.e. restoration of antique aircraft, aviation and science education opportunities, and service) and for a medium-sized event center for symposia, reunions, and other gatherings. The community center would provide additional revenue to help maintain the airport as a self-sustaining facility into the future.

### **MAINTAINING OPEN SPACE ON THE VALLEY FLOOR**

There is an opportunity through the proposed safety improvements to acquire more open space to preserve the beautiful view shed we have just east of town. Airports are by nature low profile. All hangars are now, and will be in the future, located on the west side of the runway, allowing an unobstructed view east to the Sapphire Mountains.

### **CREATING ACCESS TO ALLOW PUBLIC ENJOYMENT OF OUR HISTORY & VIEWS**

There is a proposal to develop public trails across both the county-owned property and potentially some privately owned property in the vicinity of the airport. The trails would connect some of the historical buildings in the area, including the historical hangars and the Leonardi Farmstead, once a Daly dairy farm, with the Daly Mansion. These plans could move forward if more land is acquired, and with the cooperation of the FAA and private landowners. The possibilities for community participation are exciting.



## **RAVALLI COUNTY AIRPORT 2009: SMART ECONOMICS**

One of the purposes of the current Environmental Assessment process and subsequent update of the Ravalli County Airport Layout Plan is to analyze alternatives for airport operations to accommodate use into the future and enhance the airport's unique ability to be a revenue producing county facility rather than a taxpayer liability. In meeting FAA requirements for safety improvements, the county has an opportunity to obtain federal assistance in purchasing airport equipment, maintaining safe runway and taxiway surfaces, creating more hangar and ramp parking space, and developing new miscellaneous revenue sources to ensure sufficient funding in years to come.

### **MAINTAINING SELF-SUSTAINABILITY**

The Ravalli County Airport has historically been successful as a nearly financially self-supporting county operation. In years past, the airport has sometimes provided revenue to the county above and beyond its operating costs. Local airport revenue comes from aircraft fuel flowage fees, landing fees, hangar space ground leases, hangar development fees, Leonardi Farmstead agricultural lease, Forest Service operations, ramp tiedown fees, county road department gravel storage fees, and state registration fees for aircraft based at Ravalli County Airport. At present, most of the hangar sites have been reserved, the associated development fees have been collected, and owners pay annual lease fees on the ground. Over the past 10 years nearly 30 new hangars have been built. The preferred alternative in the Environment Assessment allows for new hangar sites and additional ramp tiedown space. Proposed development for community use of the Leonardi Farmstead and the historical hangars located southeast of the existing runway will also provide increased revenue sources for the airport. Other revenue-producing possibilities are being considered for the future. A stated FAA goal for public airports is that their sponsors (the county) work toward producing enough revenue to pay all operating expenses.

### **BOOSTING THE LOCAL ECONOMY**

Capital improvements, land purchases, and runway/taxiway maintenance are funded 95% by the FAA from Aviation Trust Fund collections on aircraft fuel taxes, 2-1/2% by Montana State Aeronautics aircraft fuel taxes, and 2-1/2% local match. Local match money has come from the Ravalli County Aviation Safety Foundation, Montana Aeronautics low-interest loans repaid out of airport revenue, direct airport revenue, and sale of used airport equipment; local county taxpayers have seldom contributed to these expenditures, and there is no county mill levy imposed or being suggested for airport funding. Construction projects are generally awarded to Montana or local Ravalli County contractors, so that much of the money stays in the community, multiplying its effects as it ripples through non-airport related businesses. The FAA shares in runway and taxiway maintenance at the same 95% rate, allowing the county to operate a safe airport at 2-1/2% of the cost of improvements. Again, this 2-1/2% is generally funded from airport operations. Preliminary results of a statewide study conducted by Montana Aeronautics through Wilbur Smith Associates to determine the economic impact of a number of general aviation airports show that the Ravalli County Airport contributes over \$14 million per year to the local economy. This figure does not include the \$3.5 million granted by the FAA for various airport projects over the past 16 years. If the preferred alternative recommended by the Environmental Assessment is selected, at least \$20 million in additional grant money can be expected to pay for land acquisition, historical hangar mitigation plan implementation, and construction and rehabilitation of runway and taxiways. As a bonus beyond the community use possibilities of this project, the Bitter Root Irrigation District will be able to build a new, more convenient facility after selling their present location to the county for airport use, a sale funded at 95% by the FAA.

### **RISKING IT ALL**

If Ravalli County chooses an alternative that is not satisfactory to the FAA and Montana Aeronautics, all future maintenance costs will become a 100% liability to the county, i.e. local taxpayers. It is not possible for a small general aviation airport to generate enough revenue to handle the capital expenditures necessary for maintaining a safe runway environment. Ravalli County could expect to spend several hundred thousand dollars per year over the next 20 years to insure safe operations. FAA Sponsor Grant Assurances require the County to keep the airport open to the public, so cessation of maintenance is not an option.